

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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For More Information Contact

Michelle Peregoy, Public Information Coordinator (804) 864-7963

Cheryle Rodriguez, Acting Director of Communications (804) 864-7008

Maribeth Brewster, Northern Region PIO (703) 934-0623

Robert Parker, Southwest Region PIO (540) 381-4100 x151

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH INVESTIGATES *E. coli* OUTBREAK

(Richmond, Va.) The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is investigating an outbreak of *E. coli* O157 infection among recent attendees of a Boy Scout reservation located in Goshen, Virginia. Public health officials are working closely with reservation staff to explore possible sources of the infection through interviews with staff, the parents of the ill children, and health care providers.

“VDH was notified of this outbreak on July 27th,” explained State Health Commissioner, Karen Remley, M.D., M.B.A. As of July 31, eleven cases of infection have been confirmed and approximately 20 individuals have reported illness since attending the camp during the period of July 20 to July 26. “The majority of ill persons are residents of northern Virginia, although we are aware that attendees of the camp live in areas throughout Virginia, as well as in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and possibly other states,” said Remley.

“Some people who are exposed to *E. coli* O157 do not become ill,” explained VDH epidemiologist, Seth Levine. “Others may develop stomach cramps and watery bloody diarrhea.” Other symptoms may include vomiting, fever, and chills. In severe cases, the infection can damage other organs, such as the kidneys.

E. coli are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals such as cows. Most strains of the *E. coli* bacteria do not cause illness. However, *E. coli* O157 can cause serious illness in humans. Anyone can become infected with *E. coli* O157, but infection appears to be more common in children than adults.

The most common cause of *E. coli* O157 infection is undercooked contaminated ground beef; however, other sources have included unpasteurized milk and juice, salami, produce (e.g., sprouts, lettuce, spinach), and swimming in feces-contaminated water. Infected foodhandlers can contaminate food if they do not wash their hands after going to the bathroom. Hands contaminated while changing diapers can spread the disease (e.g., in daycare facilities). Animal-to-human transmission can occur after contact with contaminated surfaces or animals (e.g., at agricultural fairs, petting zoos, farm visits).

Public health investigators seek to identify individuals who attended this camp and developed symptoms of *E. coli* O157 infection since arriving at the camp on July 20. Persons who develop symptoms of *E. coli* O157 infection are advised to consult a physician and contact their local health department. A link to a list of local health districts is available at:

<http://www.vdh.state.va.us/lhd/>

“Fortunately, most people recover on their own within 5-10 days - but it is important that anyone who has bloody diarrhea seek medical attention just to be safe,” explained Levine. “However, antibiotics do not appear to help people get better faster and are not usually indicated. Persons with diarrhea should drink plenty of liquids to prevent dehydration. Drugs that stop diarrhea (e.g., Imodium) should not be used.”

How can *E. coli* O157 infection be prevented?

1. Never eat rare or undercooked ground beef - cook to an internal temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Keep raw meat separate from ready-to-eat foods. Wash hands, counters, utensils, and plates after contact with raw meat.
3. Do not drink unpasteurized milk, milk products, fruit juices, or ciders.
4. Always wash any raw fruits or vegetables before eating.
5. Always carefully wash hands before and after preparing foods.
6. Always refrigerate meat products. Never leave raw meats at room temperature.
7. Make sure children wash their hands carefully, especially after using the toilet or handling animals.
8. Always wash hands with soap and warm water after using the toilet or changing diapers.
9. Persons with diarrhea should not use public swimming facilities or work as foodhandlers.
10. Clean and disinfect diapering areas, toilets/potty chairs, toys, etc. at least daily and when soiled.

For more information about *E. coli* O157 visit www.vdh.virginia.gov

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